

## Just Can't Face Myself Alone Again by liadan14

**Series:** [just can't face myself alone again](#) [2]

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** All romantic contact between Steve and Dustin is 10+ years in the future, Dustin is the yenta of the group, F/M, M/M, Mike is kind of an idiot in this, Multi, Relationships with OCs are only mentioned, Some underage stuff between high school students, Will is mostly confused, growing up fic

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jennifer Hayes, Jonathan Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Max (Stranger Things), Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Dustin Henderson/Original Female Character(s), Dustin Henderson/Steve Harrington, Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Max/Lucas Sinclair, Will Byers/Original Male Character(s)

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**Summary:**

Dustin and his friends grow up in fits and starts. These are a few of them.

OR: if this pairing ever happened, this would be how.

# Just Can't Face Myself Alone Again

## Author's Note:

Okay, hi. I am sorry. I am so sorry.

I really didn't set out to write this, but like three people said I wouldn't burn in hell for it, so here ya go. My version of "The Only Way Dustin and Steve Could Ever Happen Without it Being Creepy as Shit".

Some sexual content between underage characters mentioned

Dustin doesn't stick with Farah Fawcett long after the Snow Ball. It's clear he needs a more subtle touch. He asks his mom's hairdresser, and she recommends a few sprays and mousses. She must see the blank expression on his face, because she's kind enough to demonstrate a few subtle styles for him to try that aren't, you know, poodle-like.

He confesses to Steve that he got different hair products over a milkshake at the local dairy queen, feeling awkward about it because he's really not sure why Steve is still hanging out with him.

Steve laughs at him.

Honestly, Steve laughs at him a lot.

"Dude, it's cool," he says. "You've got different hair than me. Do whatever works."

Dustin nods, shifts in his seat.

"What?" Steve asks suspiciously.

"Well, at the Snow Ball...thing...um. No one really wanted to dance with me. So Nancy did. And I'm kind of sorry about that."

Steve leans back. "You're a good kid, Dustin. Don't worry about it."

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Look, Nancy’s a great person, and I’m not mad. It’s sweet that she danced with you. Sucks that other girls didn’t.”

Dustin shrugs. “Once a nerd.”

Steve laughs, and Dustin’s not sure if it’s his imagination or not, but it sounds brittle to him, like he’s picturing Nancy and Jonathan together.

They’re cute. Dustin hates to admit it, but Jonathan is so happy just being around her that it just makes sense. Jonathan is never happy.

“So tell me more about this Back to the Future thing that’s got you all excited.”

“Oh my god,” Dustin says, totally derailed from thinking about stupid love triangles. “So, like, I’ve only seen the preview four times, right? But...”

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Watching Lucas and Max together gets easier. For one thing, now that El is back, Lucas and Mike aren’t always jealous. When just one of them has a girl in their vicinity, the other one invariably envies the attention. It saves Dustin the endless “No *you* betrayed the party!” “No, *you* betrayed the party!” arguments. He’s aware he’s guilty of it himself, but he is distantly aware that this is the shit you’re probably supposed to grow out of eventually.

For another, the more he knows about Max, the more he realizes that she has something of a temper. It’s not a bad thing, he realized things at home weren’t exactly great the second she saw her brother back at Will’s house and was more scared of him than a freaking Demo-Dog. She’s more than entitled to her temper.

But Dustin is really not good at being yelled at. It scares him, makes him want to walk off and hide in his closet and never talk to people again. He’s more of a peacemaker at heart.

Lucas, though, Lucas is a lot like Max in that sense. They have

explosive arguments over stupid shit, and bicker like crazy even when they're getting along. Dustin, being an analytical mind, thank you very much, can tell just how much more Max relaxes every time she and Lucas have a blow-up argument over arcade games and the world doesn't end.

So Dustin's okay.

Well, Dustin's a little lonely, but he'll live.

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It takes Dustin a few months to realize Steve is just lonely too. That's why he's hanging out with Dustin so much (and by so much, he means an average of about once a month). Dustin guesses it's better than hanging out with Max's brother or whatever, but it's still a little weird.

"I don't mean to be weird about this," Dustin says, "but, like, wouldn't you rather not be spending time with me?"

Steve grins. "Aw, kid. You're not that much of a dork."

"Yeah I am."

Steve shrugs. "All my friends are kind of Nancy's friends too. I don't want to make things weird."

Dustin stares at him. "But...like...you're the hurt party. You get to keep the friends. That's how it works."

Steve snorts. "It is, huh?"

Dustin nods. "Yeah. I mean, that's how my parents did it. I guess my dad skipped town, so that kind of helped, but still."

"I mean, it's not like Nancy actually cheated on me, we were mostly broken up."

"Mostly."

"Well. I mean. I guess I made it seem like we were. Or something.

And she's so happy now. So I did something wrong."

Dustin considers. "I think that's faulty logic, Captain Kirk."

Steve stares at him blankly.

Dustin gives up.

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Steve takes a really embarrassingly long time to get over Nancy. Like, really, really incredibly embarrassing. Before Nancy he would date girls for maybe a week, get laid every couple months when he could be bothered to date a girl for longer. He had watched Nancy for a long time from afar, before that, which sounds creepier than it is, but he'd liked her smile, and her soft pink sweaters. And then, one day he heard her laugh at a joke he made and he thought, hey, maybe I'm not way too dumb for this girl,

After Nancy, he has a hard time just going to school in the morning.

She's just always there, and she's so, so nice about it. She doesn't hold hands with Jonathan, or kiss him in the hallways. She always smiles at Steve and asks him how he's doing. She still helps him with his homework and his college applications. She's probably the only real friend he has, except Dustin.

It makes Steve feel like the world's biggest asshole.

Because he knew, the entire time they were together, knew Byers was jealous as all hell, watching them from behind his books, keeping his distance. Knew Byers hated it with a passion when he kissed her by her locker. Knew and did it anyway.

And he had seethed, had seethed and raged in the privacy of his own head, about how Nancy would talk to him, make sure he was doing well, all the same shit she now does with him.

He should really be the bigger guy and just cut off all ties. Stop letting Nancy be nice to him. Get the fuck over it all already.

But he can't. Not quite yet anyway.

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After six months, the novelty of having a girlfriend still hasn't worn off for Lucas.

It may never wear off.

This might also be because of who his girlfriend is.

Max is not quite like any of the other girls he knows. Lucas is aware that all girls are different, thank you, but Max is interesting, and clever, and she doesn't think D&D is stupid, and she can kick his ass at arcade games.

Lucas is aware he is extremely lucky, and he tries to be as nice to her as possible.

He's pretty thrilled he can at least string complete sentences together in front of her by now without sounding like an idiot, a jackass, or both. In public, that is. Sentences like "Wanna dance?" or "Do you want to go see a movie together?", mostly. He's okay at asking her about homework or Star Trek or whatever.

When they're alone, he has no problem talking to her. It's weird. He even tells her that he still feels kind of bad about Dustin.

"I mean, I probably wouldn't have gone out with him anyway," Max says. "But I wouldn't have gone out with you, either, if I knew."

"Wait, what?" Lucas says, struck dumb by the thought of it.

Max shrugs. "I was the new kid, I wouldn't want to start a fight between you guys. That would make everything worse."

"But, like, you're not going to break up with me?"

Max leans back, staring up at the sky, considering. "HMMMM..."

Lucas starts to get worried.

She laughs. "No, you idiot."

After a while, she says, “Maybe you should talk to Dustin, though.”

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Nancy wasn't lying when she said Dustin was always her favorite. It's not that she dislikes the others, or anything, it's that Dustin has a sort of hint of maturity the others haven't quite reached yet.

It's just a hint, mind. He's still an *idiot*, but he's an idiot who thinks to do things like offer her the last slice of pizza, or stay later to help clean up the den when it's covered in Cheeto crumbs and smells like teenage boy.

He also intervenes when Lucas and Mike start shouting at each other, mostly ineffectually. He shouts too, sometimes, sure, again, teenage boy. But he's just a little bit calmer, a little bit more self-aware.

Also, the smile is kind of adorable, but Nancy did not say that.

Still, it's kind of strange when Steve tries to cut her loose by saying, “I'll be okay, Nance. I have friends. Dustin's mom is making me come over for dinner this week.”

“Steve,” she says.

“No, I'm being totally serious,” he says. “Don't knock it till you've tried the matzah ball soup.”

“Steve.”

“He's a good kid,” Steve says. “And that's not the point. You don't need to keep feeling sorry for me.”

“I don't feel sorry for you,” Nancy insists.

Steve runs a hand through his stupid perfect hair. “Yeah you do. And I'm sorry, but it's really not making it easier to get over you.”

“Oh,” she says.

“Yeah. Oh.”

Nancy is fully aware that she has escaped a lot of consequences for her actions because Steve is just so nice.

As she gets up to leave, she says, “Hey, Steve? Just...I just want you to know that you were never a bad boyfriend. You were the best first boyfriend I could ask for. This, us, ending, that’s all on me.”

She doesn’t let him answer that.

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Steve is doing alright. It’s almost June, now, and he has his acceptance to Bloomington. His dad wants him to major in economics, and Steve will, because his dad is paying. Steve is pretty sure by now that that isn’t what he’s going to be doing with his life.

“Don’t worry about it,” Mrs. Henderson tells him. “I majored in art history, look at me now.”

Steve is vaguely aware that she works in an office job that has nothing at all to do with art history. Honestly, it’s just way too late to ask now that he’s Dustin’s honorary babysitter (Dustin keeps saying he’s way too old for a babysitter, and Steve agrees, but he also doesn’t really like thinking about Dustin hanging out all alone when his mom’s not there).

So, he’s not too worried about economics. He may even like it.

Instead, he spends some time grooming Dustin to be his successor. The kid’s way too enthusiastic – he can try not to care all he wants, but it always breaks out all over again, whether he’s talking about Wookies or newts or whatever weird thing Eleven has asked him about that week.

But that’s okay, enthusiasm can be charming too. Steve’s more worried about him not getting totally clobbered in high school.

So he cajoles-prods-forces Dustin into going running with him as often as he can. He explains the relevance of joining a sports team.

After about fifteen minutes of basketball, Dustin rightly says “I suck at this.”



“Yeah, well,” Steve says. “I suck at a lot of things too. There’s other sports.”

Dustin sighs, but keeps on trying.

He really is a good kid.

Steve hopes he doesn’t notice Steve has mostly just been hanging out with him to avoid thinking about the mess that is his love life, but Dustin’s probably too smart for that to fly.

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After Steve leaves for college, Dustin thought he would be kind of at loose ends. He wasn’t counting on Will.

Dustin is well aware he has a bad habit of treating Will either like he’s made of glass or like he belongs to Mike, but before all this shit happened, he and Will used to be pretty close. Especially because Mike and Lucas could get weirdly best friends forever-ish in an awkward way for everyone else.

And now, well, Mike and Lucas have girlfriends, and apparently, that means something to do with having less time for everyone else even though they all hang out together every day at school. Part of this might be because Mike can get jealous of people so much as breathing in El’s general direction.

The glares he sent Dustin for doing things like explaining what trigonometry is good for until El actually had to tell him “Dustin is my *friend*, Mike” were impressive.

So Dustin is actually kind of surprised when Will calls him up a few days into the summer before senior year and asks if he wants to meet up.

But they meet up, and they hang out, and then again, and again, and then Will starts going running with Dustin. At the start of freshman year of high school, they’re inseparable.

Will never talks about the Upside Down except in vague metaphors, and Dustin doesn’t ask. He does ask to see Will’s art.

Will goes red probably all the way down to his toes. “I. Um. How’d you know I still...do that?”

Dustin shrugs. “It seemed like it was your thing. If you don’t want to talk about it, that’s okay. I always thought it was really cool.”

“Really?” Will asks.

“Yeah. You were really good at it, even when you were drawing, you know, totally horrifying things.”

Will laughs.

Sometimes he brings in his artwork for Dustin to look at afterwards. He keeps it a little under wraps, but apparently, Steve wasn’t talking out of his ass, and joining the wrestling team does wonders both for Dustin’s shoulder area and his social standing, so it’s hard to get any space to themselves at lunch. They’re squished in the very middle of a very full table, and Will is trying to show him a raven design he’s covered a full page with.

Jennifer Hayes, who might still have that crush on Will, is walking by their table just a little too closely, and she says, “Oh my god, did you draw that?”

Before Will can crawl under the table, Dustin says, “Yeah, he did, he’s really good, isn’t he?”

Jennifer sets down her tray, squishes in next to Will regardless of Mike (who is probably going to pout about that, but you know what, it’s El’s job to deal with that). She grabs Will by the wrist (he blushes some more) and pulls his hand with the drawing in it up to the table.

“It’s *amazing*,” she says. “Are you taking art classes?”

“Uh, no,” Will says.

“Not even at school?”

“Oh, uh, actually that’s a really good idea,” Will says. It’s maybe the most he’s said to a girl at once.

Jennifer beams at him. By the end of the meal, she's made it seem like it was his idea to go out for dinner together on Friday.

This is how Dustin and Will figure out that girls actually also like artsy guys if they're not creepy and angry at the world like Jonathan.

("Seriously," Dustin says, "Nancy told me he once said "I don't like people". Who does that?" "My brother," says Will.)

In a weird twist of fate, and as a direct consequence to Jennifer Hayes still having a crush on him, Will is the first of them all to lose his virginity. He's fifteen.

Afterwards, he calls Dustin up for a talk.

They meet out at Castle Byers, which has only gotten mildewier and mildewier.

Will is freaking out.

He and Jennifer have definitely stopped dating, is what Dustin gleans from those first few panicked seconds.

"I don't even know," Will says. "Things were going so well, and I like the kissing parts, but, but."

"I mean, they say everyone's first time is terrible," Dustin says.

Will just shakes his head miserably.

"Um." Dustin says. "I want to help you Will, I really do, but I'm flying blind here."

"I just felt weird," Will says. "When she had me undo her bra I just...I didn't feel anything."

Dustin compares this silently to when he took Cindy Lewis to the movies two weeks ago and she let him run his hands up under her shirt while they kissed. Dustin felt a lot of things, none of them particularly emotional or meaningful.

"And the...the sex," Will says, and oh boy, here comes a sentence

Dustin is in no way prepared to hear. "I just...I didn't like it. I don't think I...is there something wrong with me?"

"No," Dustin says instantly, because that's what he's totally sure about. "Definitely not. Maybe...I mean, I don't want to, like, overstep, but, uh. Do you like Jennifer?"

It's a theory Dustin's had for a while, to be honest, ever since that dumb Snow Ball, when Will went and shared an awkward dance with a girl who had just called him Zombie Boy to his face. The theory goes something like this: Will is much too nice and will just say yes when people ask him to do things, even if he has no interest in doing it himself.

Will sighs. "She's nice, I guess."

Dustin figures he's going to have to get a little more explicit. "Will. Did you at any point actively want to fuck her?"

"No."

"Well, maybe that's why."

"No, but Dustin," Will says, still looking anguished and miserable, "I don't want to fuck *any* girl."

It takes Dustin a moment to swallow the shock of Will using a swear word.

And then another to process what he just said.

"Okay," he says. "That's fine."

"Really?"

"Of course," Dustin says. "Look, Will, you're my friend. I want you to be safe and happy."

Will's relief dims a little at the adjective "safe", and Dustin slightly regrets his word choice.

"I'm tired of always being different," Will says.

This is the beginning of Will going through high school pretending to be what he's not.

It helps that his awkward, terrible break-up with Jennifer has left the student body believing he was only in it for the sex and left her once he'd sealed the deal. Bizarrely, this works in Will's favor. Dustin will never understand girls.

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Dustin has sex with precisely one person during his high school career.

He is well aware that Mike is convinced he's some sort of Lothario (Mike's words, not his). This is mostly because Dustin has embraced the twin notions of "being friendly to people" and "going to parties". Mike has not, really, and it's an occasional strain on their friendship.

Dustin will admit he has an easier time getting dates than his friends, but this is because he is the only one of them who tries to. That's it. That's the magic solution. Dustin gets more dates, because it is easier to get more dates than zero.

This does not mean he spends every weekend making out with a different girl behind the Cracker Barrel.

When Eleven tells him this is what Mike explained he was doing on Friday nights, Dustin chokes on thin air.

"Hyperbole?" Eleven asks. This was the word of the day twenty-two days ago, and it had explained so many things.

"Yup," Dustin says.

After realizing no one had bothered to explain much of sex to Eleven beyond its existence, Dustin spent maybe the most excruciating twenty minutes of his life making a sandwich in slow motion and trying not to hear a word she and Max said about Mike and Lucas's dicks.

It doesn't get more awkward than that.

And because Eleven is still one of his very best friends, Dustin has sat through a number of discussions about what sex is like, and what she enjoys, and what Mike enjoys. Max, who had tugged at Dustin's hair, and proclaimed him "one of the girls" in a way that stung just a little, is far more reticent about what she shares in these little talks. Thank god.

So far, though, Dustin has escaped sharing stories, which is good, because his don't really go beyond a bit of heavy petting.

For part of junior and most of senior year, though, he dates Elizabeth. Elizabeth is in his English class, and far more passionate about it than most people are. Dustin gets mixed reviews in English – his interpretations are too fanciful.

Elizabeth is convinced that he asks her out as a joke.

That stings, a little, because in his head, Dustin is still an idiot nerd who gets pity-dances at the Snow Ball and who no girl wants to talk to, let alone go out with.

He's bad at remembering he's spent the last three years being popular-adjacent.

Elizabeth is a little plump, is the thing. She has a bit of a double chin, a smidge of pudge that spills over the top of her jeans. Dustin *loves* it. He's not even kidding. She fully incapacitates him for about a month while he spends his entire English period just thinking about holding her hips.

So he kind of gets where she's coming from, because teenagers aren't nice to her.

It takes about two weeks of Dustin persistently asking when he, himself, has ever been shown to make fun of her, either for her interest in poetry or for her body, and her coming up blank, for her to finally agree to a date.

He has a car, by now. It's actually Steve's old car, which is Steve's dad's old car, which is kind of a piece of junk by now. Still, it's a car, and in said car, he can take a pretty girl on a date.

And Elizabeth is very, very pretty, that first evening. She's wearing a dress, which she never does at school, and her wool stocking stretch beautifully over the curves of her thighs, and Dustin is going to be very honest here, he pretty much just wants to put his head between them.

He gets the sense, though, that that will not help his campaign for her to believe he means this thing between them seriously.

So he takes her to the movies, and minigolfing, and all sorts of dumb shit he can only sort of afford, for about a month and a half before he even gets to second base.

And then, suddenly, it's like all systems are go.

He's barely managed to skate his hand across one of her breasts (a thought he jerked off to for about a week) one day, and the next, she's grinding down on his lap in the backseat of his car.

Dustin is the last of his friends to have this experience, he is well aware. And it is not the same thing at all as Will's traumatic encounter with Jennifer Hayes, nor is it anything like the...stuff... that El and Max talk about that Dustin is still trying to forget.

Dustin thinks he can be forgiven for kind of blanking on his responsibilities and other friendships for a day or two or twelve while he discovers the miracle that is Elizabeth's hands totally ruining his hairstyle while he figures out that it is *exactly* as good between her thighs as he thought.

His friends are a lot less forgiving (as if Mike has time for anything else when Eleven hints that maybe she doesn't want to watch a Back to the Future marathon because Mike's parents are out of town).

They don't really take to Elizabeth. That is, Will makes an effort, but he's so shy, still, that it comes off all wrong. Mike assumes she's just another girl, and Lucas straight up doesn't care.

It is only through sheer force of will and a lot of whiskey drunk with Will that Dustin manages to not yell at either of them when Elizabeth dumps him after Spring Break because they're going to different

colleges, and his friends are more important to him anyway.

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Steve still comes to Hawkins occasionally. Less and less, as the years go on and he starts to notice a connection between visits home and terrible nightmares of kids being eaten by faceless monsters.

Anyway, his parents were rarely there when he still lived there, and they're around even less now. He times his rare visits to coincide with theirs, a few days every now and then.

He still makes a point of stopping by the Henderson's when he is around though. They're good people.

It's a bit of a shock to Steve when he shows up at their door to see Dustin loading up the car Steve sold him for probably 300 dollars less than what it was worth.

He's headed for college, now, too, and for some reason, Steve's visits to Hawkins become even less.

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Max and Lucas break up for about a month in the first semester of college.

It's terrible.

For one thing, they've been together so long Max is kind of at loose ends with herself, unsure of what to do with herself as a single person. She'd been careful, in high school, to maintain her friendships with the others individually, not just as Max-and-Lucas, because she had been so scared of this. Still, she feels hollowed-out, gut-punched by the loss.

She cries when Dustin calls her to see how she's doing. It's embarrassing as shit, but she'd been half convinced that was it for all her high school friendships.

"Of course not," Dustin says. "What kind of Judas do you take me for?"



“Yeah, well,” Max says. “I don’t know. I thought we could do the long-distance thing, you know? It’s not even that far. But it’s just...ugh.”

She decides, after about three minutes of trying to put it in words, that she’d rather talk about Dustin’s course load than about her feelings.

Dustin, of course, reads between the lines.

Lucas, frankly, is a fucking mess.

“I just don’t get,” he says, cracking open his fourth beer in two hours, “what happened. One minute everything’s fine, the next she says my heart’s not in it and she’s gone.”

He says this over Thanksgiving Break sitting in Mike’s basement just like old times, and Dustin still feels woozy and hungover from his midterms binge, but he can tell it’s total bullshit.

The amount alone that Lucas has bitched about what a pain it is to get from Chicago to Hawkins is pretty indicative of how much he would bitch about having to go to Notre Dame to visit Max.

When Dustin says this, Lucas goes, “Yeah, so?”

“Yeah, so,” Dustin says, fed up beyond belief, “Notre Dame is the only school that gave her a full ride. No, wait, that’s not true. Notre Dame is the only school in the mid-west that gave her a full ride, and she didn’t want to go to coastal schools because of your dumb ass. She doesn’t want to be indebted to her fucktard of a step-dad, and she wanted to stay near you. And she got into a great school, and instead of thinking it’s awesome that your girlfriend is super smart and super independent, you complain about having to visit her and paying the phone bill to talk to her.”

Lucas looks at least a little chagrined about that. “Why don’t Mike and El have this problem?” he asks, looking at the stupidly lovey couple in question.

Dustin rolls his eyes. “Because El can call him whenever she wants on her weird psychic radio thing and let’s be real, Mike gets away with a

lot of shit because she has no point of reference.”

“I heard that!”

“Shut up.”

Lucas continues to pout all night. When he leaves, Dustin tells him, seriously, “Look, if you want to be with her, suck it up, it’s a two hour car ride from Chicago to Notre Dame. If you can’t deal with the distance, figure out your priorities, but don’t go blaming this on her.”

He later finds out that the morning after Thanksgiving, at about four AM, when he’s finally sober enough to drive, Lucas gets in his car and drives to Notre Dame, because Max has no reason left to be in Hawkins for the holidays.

He transfers in the spring semester.

This leaves Will and Dustin alone in Chicago. Which is kind of nice, actually.

They had requested each other as roommates in their freshman year, mostly because they were both worried about waking strangers up with their insane nightmares.

Sophomore year, they move off-campus together. Dustin pays for the apartment by picking up shifts being the audio-visual guy for the theater, and later by TA-ing.

Will has to work full-time and study part-time, because he just can’t afford school otherwise. Jonathan had gotten more financial aid, and he’d had Nancy with him to shoulder some of the pressure. Will has neither. It takes him a while to settle.

He works in the scene shop for his first two semesters, building sets four days a week and studying nights. Eventually, though, he remembers how much he hates manual labor and how really terrible he is at hitting things with a hammer, and he quits, much to everyone’s relief.

He works other odd jobs for most of Dustin’s time as an undergrad, but he’s finally settled by the time Dustin starts his master’s.

Still, he doesn't really date anyone. He's gotten over pretending to be straight (and wasn't that a scene, watching Mike and Lucas pretend they hadn't known forever when he came out), but he keeps saying he's just not interested in anybody.

Dustin knows this isn't precisely true, because he definitely has a bunch of male friends who like to come over on the weekends and never stay the night.

"You had better be safe when you have visitors," he says one morning after a particularly loud visitor left. So sue him, this AIDS thing is fucking terrifying.

Will rolls his eyes. "Yes, papa Dustin."

Dustin makes a face. "It's so creepy when you do that."

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Steve starts dating men exclusively after college. He's just totally given up the pretense – he likes them better. It sure as fuck explains why his hate-on for Jonathan Byers felt a lot like a hard-on.

He's comfortable with it. He ran into Nancy a while back, and yeah, there was still that spark in his gut, but it wasn't the same fervor anymore, the same quality of pathetic lap-doggishness.

Steve discovers that, when he's dating men, he's a pretty excellent boyfriend.

For about a year, anyway.

It's all cool, though. As far as he can tell, most people don't fall in love forever and ever before they turn twenty. It's just dumb luck that a whole bunch of people in Hawkins did. Or at least think they did.

Steve's actually pretty happy with his life at this point. He's finally got it all sorted, what he wants to do and where he wants to be.

Which, promptly, is when the principal of the K-12 school in downtown Chicago where he teaches PE and economics to high

schoolers announces that they have a new middle school science teacher, and his name is Dustin Henderson.

“You gotta be shitting me,” is what he says.

But no one is shitting him. There Dustin is. They haven’t seen each other in three years now.

Dustin’s shoulders have stayed just as filled out as they were after four years of wrestling, but he’s put on a little bit of softness around the middle. His hair, which Steve has mostly seen either as a total fucking mess or an artwork, is shorter than he’s ever seen it. He’s carrying a bag over his shoulder, and wearing glasses, and he looks like such a teacher.

Dustin waves awkwardly around the room. “Hi, uh, nice to meet you, I hope to get to know you all soon, and – Steve?”

Steve sticks his hand up awkwardly and waves. “What’s up?”

“I. Um.”

The staffroom is totally silent.

“Well, this is awkward,” Dustin says. He slides into a seat across from Steve and waits for people’s attention to drift elsewhere, which it does, eventually.

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Over coffee, a few days later, Dustin finds out that Steve got his Master’s in teaching immediately after undergrad, and just felt weird telling anyone in Hawkins about it because of his reputation there in high school.

Dustin scoffs.

He also learns that there were definitely a few experiences with kids in his senior year that inspired Steve to take this path.

Dustin rarely feels like an asshole (it’s a character flaw, being as nice a dude as he is). He does then, because he’s been staring a bit too

much at the way Steve's hair still defies gravity, and it's probably really gross to ogle a guy who just admitted you inspired him to do good things with his life.

Ah well.

Steve is little better off, all things concerned. He'd always clicked weirdly well with Dustin, and now that he's a) aware he's not all that straight, and b) they're both adult, it's all kind of different in a way that makes Steve feel like a cradle robber.

He still finds himself inviting Dustin over for dinner, making him an unofficial gym buddy, introducing him to his Chicago friends.

It's a little frightening how well it works.

By the time Christmas break rolls around, they don't even have to talk about sharing a ride back to Hawkins for the holidays.

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Dustin has a stylized tattoo of a harp on his left pec, and it drives Steve slowly insane for about three months of gym dates before he asks.

"Oh, yeah," Dustin says. "Will works part-time as a tattoo artist these days. We all have one. Y'know, I'm the bard."

Steve slowly lowers his dumbbell. "Oh my god," he says. "How are you all still such dorks?"

Dustin grins, and thank god, he's not trying to hide how wide and toothy his smile is anymore, not like he used to, in college, when he pretended not to care about anything. "Mike cried, when Will did his."

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Dustin has gained a lot of comfort in his own skin he was lacking for a very long time. He knows what he's good at and what he isn't, and he's figured out how he feels about stuff.

He likes sex, when he likes a person. He's not interested in the casual flings Will goes for, not that he thinks they're a bad thing. It just makes him feel awkward, and maybe his time with Elizabeth hardwired a certain preference for waiting a while into his bones.

He's had two relationships since her, and only one of those was with a girl, and it's all cool. His only real worry was that Will would think he was stealing his thunder with the whole bisexuality deal, but that was a really dumb worry.

So, Dustin likes taking it slow.

He's still kind of confused about how he seems to have been dating Steve Harrington for about six months with no intention on either of their side of doing so.

He paces a lot, trying to figure this out, especially in the latter two months, when he finally figures out that that is what's happening.

He's solved four crises for Mike and El in the last three years, it cannot possibly be this hard to understand his own shit.

Will finally tells him to man up and talk to Steve.

The thing is, Dustin is pretty sure he had a massive crush on Steve when he was thirteen and got his signals crossed because he didn't understand it. The other thing is, he kind of wants to lick Steve's neck. It makes verbalizing very difficult.

He finally does follow Will's advice and just asks like a grown-up.

Steve stares at him like he's oncoming traffic and Steve's a deer, and Dustin is 80% certain he's fucked it all up now.

And then Steve says, "I mean...I...but you...jesus fucking Christ, I've never been good at this part. Can I just lick your fucking tattoo already?"

And he does.

Dustin brings Steve as his date to Mike and El's wedding.

It's a testament to their friendship that no one asks him if it's weird or creepy until the ceremony is over.

**Author's Note:**

...and I would like to point out this fic nearly turned into porn twice, because I have full-time responsibilities and I never write fic anymore unless it's like short pornlets, so that is my instinct, but I feel weird an creepy enough as it is.